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Producing Music, Producing Myth? Creativity in Recording Studios

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Abstract

This paper presents research on the power of myth (Barthes 1972) and commonly accepted beliefs, or “doxa” (Bourdieu 1977), in shaping creative practices inside recording studios. Drawing from two ethnographic case studies of rock and hip-hop artists in recording studios, this paper addresses the (re)production of myths during studio sessions. Through critical incident analyses, we challenge romanticized representations of studios as individualistic spaces and highlight how mythic representations of creativity influence musicians’ technical expectations of recording processes. Additionally, we illustrate the circulation of, and moments of resistance to, myths from cultural domains outside of the studio that pervade practices within studios. In sum, we show that studios – sites involving the intense scrutiny of music-making – offer insightful contexts in which to examine how myth can shape recording processes and studio practices.

KEYWORDS: creativity, rock, hip-hop, recording, myth, recording studios

Introduction

Popular accounts of creativity inside recording studios often mythologize and romanticize the record production process (McIntyre 2012). Romantic images of recording studios, and what apparently happens inside them, pervade popular media and are reproduced in Hollywood films and music documentaries; see, for instance: *Begin Again* (Carney 2013); *Music and Lyrics* (Lawrence 2007); *Ray* (Hackford 2004); *Sympathy for the Devil* (Godard 1969). Music documentaries in particular often represent an incomplete view of the recording studio and its processes, filming musicians “delivering [a] collective performance rather than focusing on the fractured, individual nature of overdub performance central to most multi-track popular music recording” (Williams 2011: web source). In popular music-making, depictions of “the artist” as the sole creative force inside the recording studio inadvertently diminishes the contributions of others (engineers, producers, and other musicians) and the necessary interactions with recording technologies (Thompson 2016). Yet, a dramatic, glamorous and partial picture of the recording process is difficult to refute because of the often private and closed environment of the recording studio. The lack of access to the environment, coupled with romanticized depictions contributes to numerous myths that surround record-making and the production of popular music (Auslander 1998; Frith 1998; Moore 2002).

Myths have been described as partial truths, or fictions, that privilege particular versions of a shared social reality (Barthes 1972). As they are told and retold, myths develop into critically unquestioned aspects of dominant cultural practices. Some studies into record production have disputed some of these myths. For instance, research has shown that the recording process is always, to some degree, collaborative (Hennion 1989; Zak 2001), and often involves a “creative collective” (Hennion 1990). The creative collective is a team of individuals who work together on the production of the recording including tasks such as song writing, arranging, engineering, producing and performing. The final recording is therefore the result of “a continuous exchange of views between the various members of the team; and the result is a fusion between musical objects and the needs of the public” (Hennion 1990: 186). Less unionized and more contemporary methods of collaboration within record production can see roles of the songwriter, engineer and producer overlap, sometimes within a single individual. In contemporary record production the artist can be viewed as embedded within the creative team, often with simultaneous duties such as co-writer, performer and producer. Nonetheless, the contribution of each individual involved in the recording process influences the final result and although it is the artist or band that is credited on the record’s promotional material, “most tasks involved in making a record require some measure of artistry” (Zak 2001: 163; see also Howlett 2009).

The promotion of a creative group over the creative individual highlights the collective nature of art making (Becker 1982; Wolff 1981) and also challenges the Romantic discourse of the producer as auteur. Because art-making takes place within a cultural framework (ibid.) those involved in making music recordings are constrained and enabled by “the available technologies and expertise, by economics, and by the expectations of their audience” (Shuker 1994: 99).

Therefore, rather than the result of one person's efforts, the production of a record is the outcome of "the dynamic interrelationship of the production context, the texts and their creators, and the audience for the music" (ibid.), featuring complex interactions between personnel, technology, workplace, aesthetics of musical and production intention. These ideas further contest depictions of the sole, creative artist. Although there is an established field of record production studies, including many studies that focus on musicians in studios, few provide empirical, ethnographic accounts of relations and representations of creativity during the production process (Hennion 1990; Kealy 1990; Fitzgerald 1996; Gibson and Connell 2005; Meintjes 2003; Porcello 2004; Bates 2008; McIntyre 2008, 2012; Thompson and Lashua 2014; Wolfe 2012; Woloshyn 2009).

In this paper, we spotlight the complex relations in our studio work and decentre myths of studios as spaces of solitary creative artists. Beginning with the literature on myth and creativity, we then introduce the methods employed in our ethnographic case studies of rock and hip-hop musicians in recording studios. Because cases "exist in context" (Flyvbjerg 2001: 136) and developing context is central in case study research, we focus specifically on "critical incidents" as illustrative "magnified moments" (Messner 2000: 766) that not only highlight key issues in each case, but also point to wider resonances. Hochschild (1994: 4, in Messner 2000: 766) defines "magnified moments" as, "episodes of heightened importance, either epiphanies, moments of intense glee or unusual insight, or moments in which things go intensely but meaningfully wrong. In either case, the moment stands out; it is metaphorically rich, unusually elaborate and often echoes". For us, critical incidents can also highlight otherwise taken-for-granted and mundane episodes that offer sharp insights into everyday social relations. Similar to an ethnographic extract or expanded field note (Coffey 1999), analyses of critical incidents as magnified moments provide explanations of how social processes (such as, in our cases, the reproduction of myths) play out in specific contexts (like recording studios). Our analyses underscore studio practices that were highly collaborative and interactive. Furthermore, we highlight how mythic representations of studios often overlook or diminish the more mundane processes of music production and how these myths influenced some of the musicians' technical expectations of recording studio processes.

Myths

Myths involve the social construction of shared social realities and meanings. A myth therefore can be considered "a story by which a culture explains or understands some aspect of reality or nature" (Fiske 1990: 88). Barthes (1972) observes that myths are deeply embedded in communication systems that circulate as signifying practices in the culture of everyday life, including speech, language, images, and music. Barthes sought to explore myth as a signifying practice in popular culture, including wrestling, magazines, advertisements, films, newspaper articles, food, cars, furniture and clothes (Manan and Smith 2014). All of these practices are "forms" of myth that have a "signifying function" (Barthes 2009: 137). In other words, myths can be ways in which people attempt to organize and make sense of their lives. Popular music and representations of the

recording studio are also caught up in these complex symbolic systems in which “music is related to events outside of itself” including “the larger sociocultural field in which music is part” (Tagg 1987: 287). Myth therefore serves “to organize shared (coded) ways of conceptualizing often under-theorized cultural practices” (Manan and Smith 2014: 207). These coded conceptions or signs involved in the construction and sharing of myth are comprised of a signifier and a signified (for instance: the electric guitar is a signifier; rock music is the signified). These together produce a second order of meaning (“rock music can only be played on an electric guitar”). This second order is signification, or myth, which is “a more elaborate and ideologically framed message or meaning” (Hall 1997: 39) and one that is intricately linked to, and manifested concretely in, everyday power relations.

Myth can therefore be considered in relation to power: myth is often ideological, involving ideas that are passed off as natural, inevitable or common-sense which serve to legitimate a particular version of social reality. Myth often serves to mask, hide or conceal, some aspects of power in social relations (Hall 1997), and as such, it exacerbates the already private nature of the recording studios. Consequently, many myths can “operate to shore up existing structures of power, ‘naturalize’ history and make the political agendas of the powerful seem unexceptional” (Shepherd and Buckley 2003: 286). In a *précis* of Barthes’ *Mythologies*, Moriarty (1991: 21) explains that researchers must expose myth: “to make the natural, the taken-for-granted, appear strange and remote, to establish unsuspected connections, to subvert cultural hierarchies”. Myths are significant (that is, they signify, with power) in terms of how people make sense of the world. In popular music-making, myths circulate to structure sense-making in regard to musicians (mythogenic performers such as David Bowie) and spaces (mythologized studios such as Abbey Road studios; see Bennett 2016 for an in-depth discussion). Such myths point to the meaning-making capabilities of stories that are not true or false *per se*, but that blur the distinction between true and false, reality and illusion, as well as natural and social orders of things. They offer, in the words of Stuart Hall (1997: 41) “a message about the *essential meaning*” of cultural practices that are in need of interrogation, as in Hall’s reading of advertisements of stereotypical Italianness or Englishness; or as in Barthes’ (1972) reading of French imperialism, and in our research, of studio-ness: the power of myth to structure creativity in the domain of recording studios.

Creativity and myth

Creativity has often been linked to the mystical and the divine. For example, in the philosophical writings of both Socrates and Plato the voice of God was said to be speaking through the poets (Barfield 2011). In Western thinking, historical and philosophical views of creativity have continued to implicitly influence popular beliefs about creativity in which there are considered to be two general views: “inspirational” and “Romantic” (Boden 2004). These views assume that creativity cannot be systematically explored or reduced to its constituent parts and are commonly

believed by many to be literally true. But they are rarely critically examined. They are not theories, so much *myths*: imaginative constructions, whose function is to express the values, assuage the fears, and endorse the practices of the community that celebrates them. (Boden 2004: 14)

Romantic notions of creativity in the recording industry prevail in the popular imagination of artists, engineers, producers and audiences (Williams 2011; McIntyre 2012). Historically, the artist has been the dominant focus in cultural commentary on popular music and record production, with particular emphasis on the Romantic ideals of creativity. Rock musicians in particular have often been characterized by Romantic ideology in which true creativity lies in opposition to commercialisation (Wicke 1990) and being creative therefore means being free from any economic constraint (ibid). Although there is a body of literature that contradicts these views (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1993; Stravinsky 2008; Wolff 1981) these ideas are so embedded into the culture of the recording industry that: “they are reflected in the way artists are sold to audiences, the way audiences think about what happens when records are made and they make regular appearances in articles and conversations about the studio and its practices” (McIntyre 2012: 149). Bourdieu (1977) refers to this accepted belief system as “doxa”, which is a universe of common opinions, undisputed beliefs and popular ideas that exist within a field of cultural production. In other words, doxa contains the myths that are commonly shared without question amongst members of the field to such an extent that they become generally established as truths.

One illustrative area where Bourdieu’s concept of doxa can be applied within analyses of recording studios is the superficial division between art and craft. Bourdieu (1996) labels this division the autonomous and heteronomous poles of an art world and it can be seen in the depiction of art-based or autonomous practitioners, such as the recording musician, and more craft-oriented or heteronomous studio personnel such as the engineer or the record producer. All are needed in the recording studio to create a recording but from certain viewpoints, or the doxa of the field, one appears to be considered more artistic and creative than the other. The socio-cultural construct of doxa therefore functions to infer a creator’s artistry and is used to make superficial judgments between art, craft and creativity. Because doxa is believed by many in the field to be real and thus, self-evident, it is rarely critically examined.

The doxa of the recording studio therefore has an inherent relationship to Romantic ideas of creativity and given the complex and multiple contributing factors to creativity, sociological models of creativity proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1988), Kerrigan (2013) and Thompson (2016), provide more suitable illustrations of the multifaceted socio-cultural exchanges between recording musicians and their environments. Rather than placing the individual at the centre of creativity and the creative process, these models show that creativity occurs through a convergence of multiple factors within a dynamic system of interactions (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, 1999). The “systems model of creativity” proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1988) illustrates the on-going dynamic process of creativity that contains three parts: a set of symbolic rules, practices and guidelines called a “domain”, an “individual” who brings something unique into

that domain and a “field” of specialists or experts who recognize and substantiate that novelty (Csikszentmihalyi 1996: 6) (see FIGURE 1).

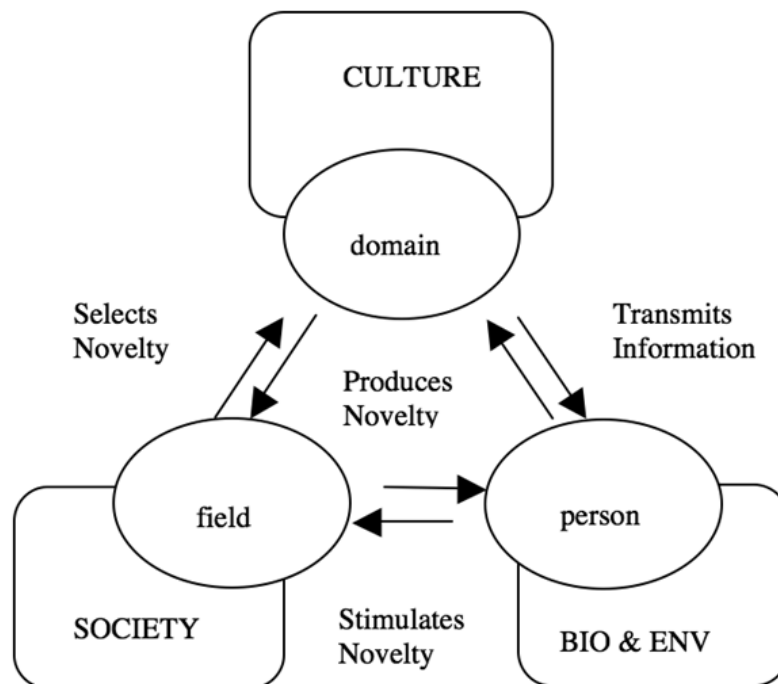


FIGURE 1: Systems Model of Creativity (Csikszentmihalyi 1999: 315).

Rather than something mystically inexplicable or the result of a sole individual, creativity inside the recording studio can be viewed as a process that involves a complex interaction of all three elements of individual, domain and field. Importantly, the model of the creative system shows that creativity is not determined by referring to a field’s doxa, rather it demonstrates that creative practices occur at the confluence of an individual (musician, engineer or record producer), a knowledge system (domain), and a social organisation that understands and applies this knowledge system (field).

Methods: ethnographic case studies and critical incidents

Historically, questions of myth and creativity in record production have been difficult to address empirically. This is because of the private nature of recording studios where the creative process often takes place behind closed doors (Williams 2011). Our research, conducted independently of one another, takes advantage of our own insider status as studio engineers and musicians. Because we focused on specific processes within particular studios, we consider our methods within case study research design. Case study research involves engaging with the “particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (Stake 1995: xi). Specifics, particulars, and minutiae matter, and gaining first-hand experience of the recording studio

and getting “close to the action” was central to understanding recording studio practices. Both cases draw upon ethnographic data collection approaches, involving many hours of participant observation within recording studios, working alongside musicians and other studio personnel.

The data is presented as two case studies, primarily to allow each of the examples to be included in concrete and descriptive detail and frame some of the issues and myths of creativity and the recording studio more broadly. Brett’s case (Lashua 2013; Thompson and Lashua 2014), focused on a university-community collaboration to co-produce a 12-song collection that “spoke back” against the marginalisation of young people during the neoliberal regeneration of Liverpool’s city centre. Twenty-three Liverpool-based urban musicians and producers (working in hip-hop, rap, grime, soul, dubstep and R&B genres) were invited to participate collectively in the project. Acting as both studio engineer and participant-observer, Brett documented the recording process via a combination of field notes, audio interviews, and still photographs. Paul’s case study (Thompson 2016) focused on a rock band, an engineer and a record producer as they collaborated on a rock recording inside the studio. The band were in the process of recording their second record, having previously recorded in a smaller recording studio on the outskirts of Liverpool. Although it was not their first experience of recording in a studio, it was their first experience working with a record producer. The record producer’s role in this instance was to guide the recording project, offering feedback on performances, supervising the recording engineer, and use his knowledge and experience of the record production process to guide the participants. Collaboration was therefore necessary to address any deficiencies in domain knowledge. Paul documented the creative process through the use of fieldnotes, audio recordings and multi-angle film recording in order to capture the interactions of the participants in both the control room (where the mixing console and studio speakers are housed) and the live room (where the recording musicians perform). The participants have been anonymised to protect their identity and are identified within each case study by referring to their function during the recording process.

Our case study approach was broadly based upon Yin’s (2011) 3-step model for case study design, which includes binding and framing the case, selecting the case study type and then linking theories through data analysis. First, two specific cases from our fieldwork were selected, based on Brett’s work with hip-hop musicians in a small University studio, and on Paul’s work in a larger, commercial studio with rock musicians. Two cases were framed and bound by the two recording studios featuring two different styles of music. Second, we selected specific case studies to develop broader understandings of myths in creative studio practices (Stake 2005: 445). Messner (2000) defines critical incidents as moments that surprise or stand out during an activity, or resonate later, upon reflection. These magnified moments allowed us to draw attention to the relations between studio personnel and recording artists, between agency and structure; they further allowed the juxtaposition of creative record production with the reproduction, and at times disruption, of studio myths.

Myth and creativity in a recording studio: case study 1

The Liverpool One Project was a collaborative initiative designed to help catalyse Liverpool's urban music scene in the wake of the cultural regeneration of the city centre and the perceived exclusion of urban music from central venues (Lashua 2013). Working with a local non-profit urban music and culture company, during 10 weeks of sessions in the University of Liverpool's recording studios Brett collaborated with a roster of 23 local singers and producers invited to create a 12-song digital mixtape. Released freely in March 2011 via Bandcamp¹, each song featured a backing track created by a local producer² and vocal performances from a combination of local singers. For example, one grime producer contributed an instrumental track, for which an R&B vocalist wrote and recorded verses and a rap artist delivered the chorus. On another track, a dubstep instrumental featured vocals written and delivered by five different rap vocalists. Although some of the participating artists knew one another, most had never worked together, and in some instances, some had never met before. As such, the studio was not only a space for creative collaboration, but also of introductions, critical conversations about the changing city and its music scenes, as well as instances of friction and conflict. These relations can be read in terms of myth: "Liverpool is a mythically musical city due to the legacy of the Beatles"; "hip-hop is out of place in Liverpool because of its rock heritage" (Lashua, Cohen and Schofield 2010). In what follows, two critical incidents showcase specific myths about urban music-making in a studio. The incidents illustrate ways that the powerful, mythic role of the engineer was challenged too.

Critical incident 1

As recorded in Brett's field notes, the Liverpool One Project sessions began as if opened directly from a box: when the first singers arrived at the studio, one (an R&B singer) delivered a USB drive carrying a handful of backing tracks made in advance by an electronic dance music producer specifically for the project. In this there was a tension between the notion of backing tracks as ready-mades that appeared (almost as if by magic) from elsewhere, and tracks that were crafted in the studio. In the former, studio sessions were reserved only for vocals. Here, the backing track was treated as a complete, pre-mixed file not to be added to or altered, unless to lengthen (or shorten) to fit with the developing lyrics for verses or choruses. The instrumental track was simply imported into Pro Tools, as a stereo audio file. This largely reduced creative collaboration to the involvement of the vocalists, against the overarching ethos of the project, and excluded the producers by limiting reciprocities to their "gift" (Mauss 1990). On the occasions that producers attended sessions, they delivered their tracks in person, and then sat back, quietly, in a rear area of the studio control room. The message was clear: in these sessions, the studio was the domain of vocalists.

This mini-case shows a scaled systems model (Thompson 2016) in action through the interrelations of people (the agents), field (society), and domain (the unwritten cultural rules that shape shared maps of meaning; Hall 1997). As Thompson's (2016) revised systems model illustrates (see FIGURE 2), at the group level participants generate a microsystem of creativity inside the recording studio in which the recordings they are working on form a microdomain and the studio

participants form a microfield. In this scaled system, participants drew from the domain to inform their ideas and the group accepted or rejected these ideas based on their understandings of the criteria for selection from the broader field (Thompson 2016).

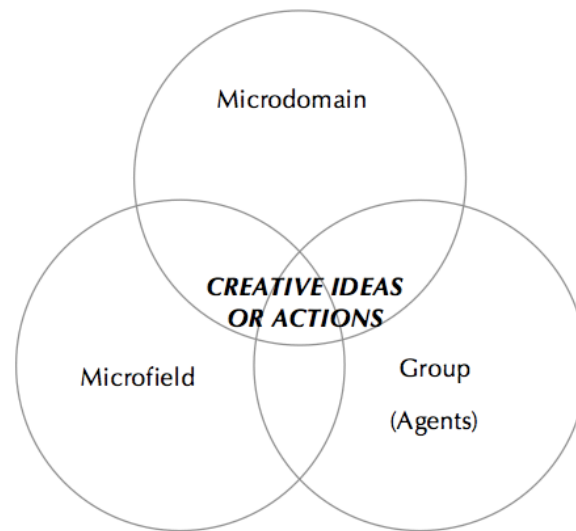


FIGURE 2: Revised Systems Model of Creativity Scaled to a Group Level (Thompson 2016: 84).

In session after session, Brett's field notes charted a pattern in the order of tracking that reflected this approach to creativity: a new stereo audio file from one producer or another was loaded in Pro Tools to provide a backing track; a group of vocalists congregated around the mixing desk to decide who would sing in which part of the song, what the song lyrics would be about, and then to start crafting lyrics. In another area of the control room, another group of singers shared headphones while gathered around a laptop, listening to different backing tracks and starting to craft lyrics too. The sessions were spaces for vocal creativity; there was little allowance for playing around with the backing tracks; indeed, even basic edits of the musical tracks were viewed as slowing down the flow of the sessions and dampening the creative energy amongst the vocalists. In effect, the vocalists' work became the foreground throughout the sessions and the producer's contributions were pushed into the background. This kind of participation perpetuates mythic patterns of hip-hop music-making, creating an illusory space where vocal artists create in isolation. The instrumental track becomes merely a backdrop against which the rest of the real action – the vocals – takes place. These patterns celebrate the contributions of vocalists while diminishing or ignoring the contributions of others. The centrality of the vocalist/rapper in studio creativity is part of the mythic construction of hip-hop (Bradley 2009).

Critical incident 2

Near the project's conclusion, the three project producers (including Brett, who was also project engineer, and two other session participants³) decided to build one instrument track in the studio from scratch in an attempt to diversify its scope. Guitarists from a local rock group were invited to attend the next project session and improvise melodies over some basic drum loops. To Brett's ears, the guitarists provided beautifully lush material; however, when it came time to construct the backing track, and against Brett's advice, the other two producers decided not to use guitar parts at all. Rather than a matter of following hip-hop conventions, guitar was deemed to be too much of a signifier of Liverpool's rock music heritage. Here the session artists challenged and overruled the expertise of the engineer (in itself a powerful myth; it is worth noting that studio personnel reify myths too). This decision was in part because the Liverpool One Project had become more than a statement about the regeneration of the city centre and neoliberal space in the Liverpool One shopping area. The project had become a direct challenge to the construct of Liverpool as a rock music city too (Lashua 2013), where many styles, both past and present, remained largely hidden in a city dominated by guitar-based genres (Brocken 2010; Cohen 2007). As noted elsewhere (Lashua 2011), one project participant had rapped:

Yo, just trying to make a name for myself and build me a future
 But the industry in the 'Pool is fucked
 They don't want to see a young dude makes bucks
 Just because I don't strum a guitar and shit
 I make hip-hop, it's not what I do, it's who I am, and my plan
 Is to get to the top, but it's so damn hard when the door is locked
 But I knock so hard on all of the venues "sorry, no hip-hop" that's what they
 say
 If I did indie or played dance music, they'd let me and my crew through the
 door all day.

These lyrics indicate the impetus for the Liverpool One Project as a means to contest the lack of live performance opportunities for hip-hop musicians in the city. When another project participant, a rap singer, won an "unsigned artist competition" at a local venue, the grand prize was: an electric guitar. What is a rapper to do with an electric guitar? Instances such as these show dissonance and disjuncture in the city's overarching musical culture. These are signs operating at the level of myth (Barthes 1972): urban music does not belong in Liverpool; because it is closely associated with black musical forms and youth cultures, the myth further signifies that young black people do not belong in Liverpool city centre (Lashua and Owusu 2013). It is noteworthy that the lyrics (above) also point to the myth that guitar bands from Liverpool are generally successful (at least at getting gigs); however, adhering to conventions does not necessarily translate into music industry success.

These histories, social relations and myths entered – and in some instances were resisted in – the studio too: "urban" voices would be the central focus; rock guitar would be considered, but ultimately rejected. This illustrates how studio

spaces are products of, and also productive of, powerful social relations. In this we hear echoes of Bates (2012: paragraph 1):

studios must be understood simultaneously as acoustic environments, as meeting places, as container technologies, as a system of constraints on vision, sound and mobility, and as typologies that facilitate particular interactions between humans and nonhuman objects while structuring and maintaining power relations.

The final recording for the Liverpool One Project featured parts sung by eight different artists representing hip-hop, rap, grime, soul, and R&B genres (but noticeably without guitars) was eventually titled “The Legacy”. This song became not only a celebration of current urban artists but also a celebration of diversity in the wider context of Liverpool’s musical heritage (Lashua 2014; Strachan 2010). With its soulful, Gospel-inflected chorus repeating “Echo, echo, echo, echo: Can you hear it? Can you hear it? That’s my legacy growing”, “The Legacy” also asked how the current generation of artists would be remembered by future generations. Here, as throughout most of the project, the artists’ overt lyrical links to social inequality and racism echoed though the domain of the studio with broader resonances to historic social relations in the city. In this sense, the project helped to connect individualised, personal troubles to broader public issues and debates (Lashua 2013; Mills 1959). This case study shows that the relations between artists, creativity and wider contexts are not absent from studio work. Rather, studio work can amplify the relations that suffuse artistic contexts. In this example, the sociocultural heritage of Liverpool as a rock city entered into studio creativity and was resisted there. These artists chose to celebrate an oppositional legacy instead, and by choosing to call the collaboration “The Liverpool One Project”, positioned their voices at the heart of debates about the regenerated city centre.

Myth and creativity in a recording studio: case study 2

The Romantic myth of the sole creative genius endures in popular music. This is, in part, because the contributions of other participants in recording studio processes (engineers and producers) are less known or misunderstood. It is the artist who receives top billing on the record sleeve (Zak 2001) and it is the artist’s contributions that are easily heard on the recording. However, in this case of creating a rock recording in the studio, the contributions of the engineer and the record producer were prominent throughout. This is because collaboration is vital in creating a rock recording and each participant has a role within the process. The performing musician for example is expected to provide the raw material for the final recording. The engineer’s role includes two main aspects: looking after the technical concerns of the recording process from selecting and setting up microphones to operating the recording equipment, and translating the musical intentions of the musicians and the record producer into technical action (Zak 2001). The role and function of the record producer can vary considerably from production to production, however, the record producer is expected to oversee

the entire process and work with the musicians and the engineer in realizing the creative vision for the record.

In this case, it was the engineer's job to select and position the microphones around the recording studio, placing them on the musicians' instruments and voice. Microphones are not only necessary to capture the performances of the musicians, but selecting the appropriate microphones involved balancing the needs of the musicians and the aesthetic expectations of the record producer and the musical style of rock. This process of selecting and positioning microphones is termed "microphoning" or "mic'ing" and, during this case study, was undertaken in collaboration with the record producer who helped the engineer to audition each microphone once it had been positioned. Paul observed both the engineer and record producer as they mic'ed the drums and the following critical incident illustrates the collaborative nature of microphoning whilst auditioning the microphones on the drummer's bass drum, during the early stages of the recording process.

Critical incident 1

The engineer had already selected and positioned the close microphone on the bass drum, an AKG D12, and the outer microphone a Neumann U67. The engineer and record producer listened to each microphone and then both of them together in the control room whilst the drummer played the bass drum in the live room. The following exchange was captured on the video camera in the control room between record producer (RP) and the engineer (E) as they auditioned the microphones on the bass drum:

RP: It's a bit full on there isn't it? It might be because he's using a felt beater or have you got it pointed in the centre?

E: Yes, it's pointed at the centre

RP: Ok, can you move the inside mic about two inches to the side mate and off axis a little bit.

The engineer entered the live room and repositioned the close microphone on the kick drum. He returned to the control room and the record producer and the engineer auditioned the microphone again:

RP: What does the outside sound like?

[E used the controls on the mixing console to listen to only the microphone on the outside of the bass drum]

RP: Can you turn it down a little bit so the speakers aren't stressing?

[E decreased the volume of the speakers]

E: Are you after something a bit more clicky?

RP: No I really want something a bit more airy and smoother if you know what I mean? It just sounds a little bit hard, bit too punchy.

E: I could try pulling the close mic back a bit?

RP: OK, let's try that.

The engineer re-entered the live room and moved the close microphone inside the bass drum, further away from the beater. The engineer and the record producer then auditioned the microphone again:

RP: That's a bit better, what do you think?

E: It's hard to tell until it's in the track but it sounds good so far, I quite like it.

Once the other microphones on the drum kit had been auditioned individually the record producer returned to the sound of the bass drum and identified a phase relationship issue between the bass drum and the snare. In recordings, phase relationships concern

the potential time difference when a single sound source is received by two different microphones ... Variations in mic positions or other factors may introduce differing amounts of delay before the signals are recorded ... If the sound is received at two different times, depending on the relationship of the waves' peaks and troughs, the result may produce phase problems (*phase cancellation*). (Savage 2011: 23)

Phase cancellation is a common occurrence when using several microphones on the same instrument and generally manifests as a hollow sound in which certain frequencies, or tones, appear to be missing. The following conversation was captured on the video camera as the record producer and the engineer auditioned the bass drum microphones:

RP: That sounds a bit hollow now doesn't it?

E: Yes, it's phasing.

RP: OK, let's try moving one of the mics.

Both the record producer and the engineer entered the live room and altered the positioning of the microphone on the bass drum. After some discussion they also added a further microphone on the beater side of the bass drum. After returning to the control room, the engineer auditioned the repositioned microphone and the newly selected and positioned microphone and the record producer stated: "that's much better sounding, it's got presence, more body and it's not honky anymore".

This critical incident example not only illustrates the collaborative nature of recording in the studio but also highlights that the engineer is: "responsible for much of what we hear on a recording" (Zak 2001: 165). Engineering is therefore not simply capturing the musician's performance; by selecting, positioning, auditioning and altering microphones the engineer becomes a collaborator in contributing to the sonic aesthetic of the recording. This further underlines the importance of calling critical attention to the easily overlooked practices that comprise studio work. In popular representations of the recording studio these processes do not feature; apparently mundane, but essential, tasks can easily slip into the background when the artist (in this case the drummer) takes centre stage. In other words, the example of microphoning isn't critical because it is uncommon. Rather it is critical as a normalized feature of a recording session that

isn't acknowledged in popular narratives and representations of the recording studio.

In addition to highlighting the necessary roles of supporting personnel in the recording studio, the opening critical incident also illustrates the integral role of recording technologies within the process. However, romantic images of the recording studio in music documentaries (like in Godard 1969) often diminish the role of recording technologies; further adding to the myths of the recording studio. Williams (2011: web source) argues that:

Documentaries, with the recording process as their ostensible subject, often present a myopic version of recording studio practice by focusing on the featured musicians as stars, in control of their creative endeavors and destinies. These documentaries present a skewed vision of the recording studio by emphasizing performance as something relatively unaffected by the recording process.

Evidence from this case study however showed that the musicians had to adjust their performances throughout the duration of the recording process. For example, recording as an ensemble in rock music is typically only the initial part of the record-making process. Other musical parts, such as guitar solos and backing vocals are often added on top of the ensemble recording individually. These additional parts are called overdubs; mythic representations of musicians in the recording studio in film documentaries also overlook the "fractured, individual nature of overdub performance central to most multi-track popular music recording" (Williams 2011: web source). In this case study, overdubs included brass lines, guitar solos, acoustic guitar parts, lead vocals and backing vocals. Some overdubs, such as adding backing vocals, created some anxiety for the performing musician as they had to adjust their performance to accommodate the social situation of the recording studio, as illustrated in the second critical incident.

Critical incident 2

The backing vocalist (BV) had not recorded vocals in the studio before and after the record producer (RP) had selected and placed the vocal microphone, the backing vocalist began performing the backing vocal harmony tentatively. On playback, the record producer then placed the backing vocalist's voice through a piece of software that is typically used to correct tuning but, in this case, the record producer used it to completely alter the tone of the backing vocalist's voice, resulting in an extremely high-pitched cartoon-like voice. The record producer explained "I did it to try and make him feel more relaxed because once you're having fun in the studio you usually forget about the pressure of performing a little bit more".

The backing vocalist and the other participants in the control room burst into laughter and the backing vocalist continued to sing in the high-pitched cartoon-like voice. After everyone had stopped laughing, the record producer then removed the effect and asked the backing vocalist to perform again. The backing vocalist then attempted another take and, after the take, asked to alter the balance of the mix in his headphones, or cans:

BV: It sounds weird to me, I don't know why it sounds weird.

RP: What kind of mix have you got in the cans, are you happy with it?

BV: There's a little bit too much of me, I feel like I'm on top of myself!

RP: There's too much of you in your headphones then mate?

BV: Yeah.

[The record producer altered the balance in the backing vocalist's headphones]

RP: How's that mate?

BV: I think it's better, yeah.

After another take, it was clear that the backing vocalist was struggling to sing the backing vocal in tune with the main vocal. The rest of the band made suggestions over the talkback, telling the backing vocalist to warm up, and stretch and then the backing vocalist continued with a further two takes. The record producer said nothing to the backing vocalist in between the takes in an attempt to keep the session flowing and explained: "The backing vocalist had only done a few takes and I wanted to keep going so he felt a little bit more relaxed". The lead vocalist entered the live room to help the backing vocalist with tuning the notes, singing the harmony line to him, and when he returned to the control room the record producer began to record straight away. After two further takes the record producer suggested he could move the microphone into the control room and tell everyone else to go out of the studio for lunch.

RP: I kicked everyone out of the control room so I could help the backing vocalist concentrate on what he was doing. You could see after those first couple of takes he was getting more and more nervous so I decided that it'd be just me and him in the control room and we could work at it from there. (Record producer 2012)

The pressures that arise from performing on cue in the recording studio can result in raised levels of anxiety and an inability to perform. After recording the backing vocal, piece-by-piece with the record producer, the backing vocalist acknowledged that he had misjudged the environment of the recording studio:

BV: We'd played this song so many times before live that I thought I'd be fine to roll up and do it how we do it live. But singing just that part, on my own in the live room, without anything else going on really made me feel the pressure. To be honest I really wasn't expecting it to be that difficult and I thought I'd be able to get it done after a few run-throughs. Luckily we were able to record it bit-by-bit and we could comp the backing vocal that way. (Backing vocalist 2012).

In the quote above, the backing vocalist refers to "comping", which is short for compiling and involves editing numerous short performances together to create a composite performance. Comping is an extremely common, if not ubiquitous, practice in contemporary record production because it allows the musician to record small parts of a musical section to create an overall performance. Because of its popularity in the recording studio, Digital Audio Workstations such as Pro Tools and Logic contain built-in tools and functions to facilitate the comping

process. However, the comping process can be tedious and laborious, and in the example above, the backing vocalist and the record producer comped the backing vocal together for one song over a two-hour period. Comping is a useful example of how myths function within the recording studio as comping is an often necessary process in piecing together a finished performance but it is rarely acknowledged: to do so might invite questions of musicianship or virtuosity (Gracyk 1996). This is because in the field of rock musicianship “is traditionally associated with live performance” (Grossberg 1992: 208). These socially constructed and disseminated notions of musicianship eventually become part of the myth and the doxa (Bourdieu 1977) of the recording studio and continue to influence the expectations of some of those involved in the recording process. As shown in the backing vocalist’s response above, he felt that because he had previously performed his part live that it would be relatively easy to repeat this in the recording studio. However, he had misjudged the way in which the environment of the recording studio influences the expectation and delivery of musical performance and how recording technologies play an integral part in capturing and transforming musical utterances and gestures. The record producer’s knowledge and experience was therefore paramount in both eliciting a performance from the backing vocalist and using the practice of comping to create a complete backing vocal performance. Again, the example of comping isn’t critical because it is exceptional. It becomes critical when comping shows how quotidian creative practices in studios are often left uncritically examined. Much like microphoning, comping is largely absent from popular representations of studio practices. Even the slightest activity can be complicit in the production of recording studio myths.

Conclusion

In this article we have focused our attention on the circulation and reproduction of myths in our case studies of recording studio practices. Although recording studios often have their own characteristic cultural rules, for those who use them recording studios are not removed from powerful everyday cultural relations, beliefs and myths. Rather, music-making is subsumed within the wider social meaning-making practices in which we view myths as attempts to explain or understand one’s place in the world (Fiske 1990). Recording studios are sites that invite intense attention to music-making, where (for instance, when overdubbing in a multi-tracking environment) music is deconstructed and reconstructed with immense purpose and control. It is perhaps surprising then that more attention is not given to scrutinizing the circulation and reproduction of power-laden signs and signifying practices (Hall 1997) in recording studios. In many ways studios obscure attempts to draw these matters to attention, as highly scripted, technological and hierarchical spaces (Thompson and Lashua 2014). This, we have argued, is part of the ideological function of myths in studios. In other ways, studios are spaces where dominance, resistance, and other kinds of social relations are what Hebdidge (1988) calls “hiding in the light”: in plain sight for those willing to look for them, not merely when there is a problem but also when part of unquestioned things that typically go unnoticed.

We have used critical incidents from two case studies to “solo” specific studio spaces and practices. In doing so, we have called attention to a number of mythic realities in these often cloistered environments. We have written from our positions as studio engineers, producers, and researchers in order to illustrate how the myths of the recording studio can influence recording processes and the expectations of the session participants, and to question more critically, that when we produce music, we also produce myth.

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Endnotes

¹ Available at liverpooloneproject.bandcamp.com.

² Here the term “producer” indicates someone who *creates* a musical backing track, whereas in Paul’s case study, below, it describes the person who has overall creative control of the recording and oversees the technical, musical and logistic aspects of the process.

³ Participants’ resistance to the use of guitar tracks provides an instructive magnified moment about myth-making. Our point isn’t whether Brett was wrong or right about the use of guitars; it is that the other producers were rejecting the reproduction of the myth of Liverpool rock, and Brett wasn’t fully aware of how much guitar tracks signified that myth. Brett’s participant-observer role was crucial to drawing this matter to attention, if messily so. In this, we also recognize that our direct participant-observer roles carry particular methodological considerations. We have discussed some of these in Thompson and Lashua (2014). Within critical, qualitative research paradigms, the researcher does not aspire to objectivity or to avoid bias, yet must retain a critical distance so as to avoid “going Native” (see Denzin and Lincoln 2011).

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